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# A Military Biography: Russian Minister of Defense General Igor Rodionov: In with the Old, In with the New

by Mr. Timothy L. Thomas  
and Mr. Lester W. Grau

Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

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General Pavel Grachev's pre-election dismissal as Minister of Defense touched off speculation and controversy as to who would be his successor. The announcement was not made until 17 July 1996--thirteen days after the presidential election. Colonel General Igor Nickolaevich Rodionov, head of the General Staff Academy, was appointed the new Minister of Defense. Rodionov had met with Yeltsin as late as the 12th of July, but Yeltsin did not offer him the job then. His appointment appears to be a controversial move by the Yeltsin government, perhaps even a last minute concession, and thus might explain the length of time from the dismissal of Grachev to the appointment of Rodionov. The move strengthens the hand of the Head of the National Security Council, General Alexander Lebed, at the expense of long time Yeltsin ally Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin. If his personal history is any indicator, Lebed will not support Yeltsin as Chernomyrdin has done over the past three years and will create more confrontation than conciliation with the front office. A recent Open Media Research Institute (OMRI) report seems to confirm this tendency, in which Lebed noted that while Chernomyrdin has the overall responsibility for forming a new government, appointments to the "bloc of power ministries should be agreed with me."<sup>1</sup>

Rodionov has long been Lebed's candidate. He provides depth and background that Lebed is lacking. Lebed is not a General Staff Academy graduate and lacks Rodionov's geo-strategic perspective on security issues. Rodionov will serve as Lebed's on-site instructor and provide inroads to the creative thinkers and intellectuals of the Russian military within the context of a historic Russian overview of military science and reform. As the Chief of the General Staff Academy, General Rodionov oversaw the graduation of six classes. He will identify the best and brightest of the new general officers by specialty for Lebed's consideration. Unlike his predecessor, General Rodionov will focus on genuine military reform as the cornerstone of his tenure, although he will have to leaven the optimism of his reform proposals with reality. This is an interesting co-dependent mix, one of which Yeltsin needs to be wary: Lebed needs Rodionov for background and context, while Rodionov can implement his reform plans through Lebed. One has higher political ambitions, and the other, having already offered to retire, has nothing to lose. And neither has spoken highly of the executive branch of government over the past two years.

## Background

Rodionov was born on 1 December 1936 in a military family. He was commissioned a lieutenant of armor in 1957 and commanded a tank platoon and tank company in Group of Soviet Forces Germany from 1963-1965. He commanded another tank company in the Leningrad Military District in 1965-1966. He served as a deputy commander of a tank battalion in the Moscow Military district from 1966-1967. He studied at the Malinovskiy Tank Academy from 1967-1970 and graduated with the Gold Medal. Major Rodionov commanded a motorized rifle regiment in the famed 24th Motorized Rifle Division (the "Iron Division") in the Carpathian Military District from 1970-1973. Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, he then served as the deputy division commander under Colonel K. A. Kochetov from 1973-1976, and commanded the division itself from 1976-1978.<sup>2</sup> Years after his departure, he was remembered as an excellent and popular commander.

As a General Major during exercise "Carpathian" in 1977, he commanded an exercise Army Corps. He studied at the General Staff Academy from 1978-1980 and graduated with distinction. He then commanded an Army Corps again, this time in the Central Group of Forces in Czechoslovakia from 1980-1983. He was promoted to Lieutenant General and commanded a Combined Arms Army in the Far East Military District from 1983-1985. Rodionov then transferred to Afghanistan where he commanded the 40th Army from 1985-1986.<sup>3</sup> This was the period of most intensive combat in Afghanistan as General Secretary Gorbachev had ordered a military victory in 1985. When military victory eluded the Soviet Armed Forces, Gorbachev began serious negotiations to effect a Soviet withdrawal.

Rodionov has drawn some fire from Army General Kobets in the State Duma for his actions in Afghanistan. Kobets charged that casualties soared during Rodionov's tour as 40th Army Commander. While this is superficially true, the statistics reflect Gorbachev's decision to win the Afghanistan War militarily at that time. General Rodionov's tour coincided with the hardest fighting of the entire war. Since General Kobets was also a possible candidate for Minister of Defense, this theme may have been played against Rodionov as a way for Kobets to gain access to the MOD position.

Rodionov returned to Moscow where he served as deputy commander of the Moscow Military District from 1986-1988. He then took over command of the Transcaucasus Military District from his former division commander, Colonel General K. A. Kochetov. He was removed from district command in August 1989 following the April 1989 Tbilisi, Georgia riots during which his troops killed some twenty civilians.<sup>4</sup> Although the Yeltsin government will draw some fire for appointing the so-called "Butcher of Tbilisi" as Minister of Defense, General Rodionov is well regarded within the military, who generally blame the civilian deaths in Tbilisi on civilian provocations and troops who got out of control--and not on any deliberate act of General Rodionov. In fact, a Russian military expert known for his ability to offer unprejudiced opinions of military leaders, noted at a conference nearly a year ago that Rodionov was "an honorable man, the hero of Tbilisi" for what he did there to stop a bad situation from getting out of hand.<sup>5</sup> Rodionov has headed the General Staff Academy since 1989.

Lebed's connection to Rodionov dates from the 1980s, when the two served together in the Transcaucasus Military District. When Lebed was dismissed in disgrace as commander of the 14th Army in 1995, Rodionov was the only general on active duty who openly praised his professionalism and moral qualities.<sup>6</sup> This was at some peril, since Minister Grachev was already looking for a replacement for his General Staff Academy head. Last autumn, Rodionov participated in the founding congress of Lebed's *Honor and Motherland* movement, which this year helped organize Lebed's presidential campaign. Rodionov also supported this effort.<sup>7</sup>

General Rodionov is a prolific writer whose recent publications deal with cadre policy, military doctrine, military reform and future war. Based on his writings, Rodionov will prepare the Russian Armed Forces for nuclear war, conventional theater-level war, limited guerrilla war external to Russia's borders, and ethnic, religious and civil strife within Russia itself. He is opposed to "defensive doctrine" which ties the hands of the military. Rodionov simultaneously brings two divergent issues to the table, one based on the past and one in the future: he is for the reintroduction of many of the control mechanisms and institutions of the former Soviet military; and he brings with him some of the most creative ideas for implementing radical reform within the military, from the theory and use of information war to the creation of new territorial commands. Rodionov's slogan could be "in with the old, in with the new."

## Rodionov's Marching Orders

Rodionov has three tasks set before him by President Yeltsin and others. The new Defense Minister told ITAR-TASS that "his first task would be to deal with hot spots where our people are [being] killed," naming Chechnya, Tajikistan, and Bosnia." Then he said he would turn to military reform.<sup>8</sup> A day later, he was told by Yeltsin to crack down on corruption in the military as well. Discussing the "moral climate" in the army, Yeltsin said "the officer corps is being corroded by corruption as if by rust." Rodionov said he intended to take up Yeltsin's challenge, arguing that the authority of the army depends on it.<sup>9</sup>

## Military Reform: Rodionov's Area of Special Competency

On 22 April and 18 November of last year, Rodionov wrote articles for *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (*Independent Military Review*) in which he exposed his plans for military reform. He emphasized "military reform" (the process of bringing the entire defense activity of the state in conformity with the new political, economic and social changes in society) over "reform of the armed forces" (changes within the armed forces to enable them to successfully protect the country, a component part of military reform).<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, he used America's military reform experience as an example of how to do more with less. But that does not mean that Rodionov will adopt U.S. methods, for he later noted that Russia, due to its geo-strategic position in the world, its political and economic systems, and the traditions and spiritual culture of its people, tends to regard more critically "certain proposals of supporters of a pro-West, pro-American orientation."<sup>11</sup>

Military reform according to Rodionov is not a series of quantitative changes in the Armed Forces but rather radical qualitative transformations in the essence of the state's military system. Rodionov believes that a general concept and program of military reform must be based on the

tenets of a unified doctrine of national and state security, the theory of military organizational development, and the theory of military art. Military reform will impact most dramatically on four areas.

First, the system of defense and the state's military organization must be brought in line with Russia's new geopolitical realities and the country's changed internal political conditions. This implies a re-examination of the tasks and content, nature and methods of activities of all state structures, organizations, and institutions that provide Russia's military security.<sup>12</sup> This means developing a new military policy, a system of regional and intra-state military-political set of relations with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and other allies, creating a unified system of political leadership of the country's military organization, consolidating the legal status of the country's military-political leadership system, and clarifying the role and functions of the Armed Forces and other troops as political institutions and bringing their status in line with the military-political mission.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the system of defense must be qualitatively transformed to fit the new economic conditions that confront Russia. That is, Russia needs to force its market economy to work on defense. This means elaborating a military-economic concept for the transition period, determining requirements for local, regional, and large-scale conflicts, reorganizing the system and structure of military-industrial production, reforming the infrastructure of the military economy, financial support for all measures, and determining the order and time periods for converting the national economy to work according to wartime plans. He emphasized the necessity of having capital investments to support high-tech production, since the absence of such a policy breaks the back of defense sectors in industry and leads to a loss of national independence.<sup>14</sup>

Third, there must be an in-depth reform of the essence of armed forces and other troops: their purpose, composition and structure, method of manpower acquisition; system of command and control, and system of obtaining combat equipment and armament. This includes identifying potential and existing threats and challenges to Russia's security and identifying a centralized procedure for planning and using all of the state's military forces for the defense of the country. He suggested a standing body much like the Defense Council of the Soviet era.<sup>15</sup> According to an OMRI press report of 8 July, this idea is backed by Lev Rokhlin, Chairman of the Duma's Defense Committee, who advocated the creation of a Military Council under the Security Council's jurisdiction. It would be in charge of all bodies responsible for defense and security.<sup>16</sup> Merely a week and a half later, this idea came to pass under a Yeltsin decree:

Declaring that "profound military reform" is needed to create a professional army, Yeltsin also announced that a new Defense Council will be created to implement the decisions of the Security Council, deal with issues of defense security, and supervise military construction projects, Russian media reported on 18 July. Rodionov told Russian Public TV (ORT) that he has "dreamed" that such a council would be formed to give the army "a second wind"; he added that it should oversee all aspects of military reform.<sup>17</sup>

The most ominous change from this decision appears to be Lebed's resulting increase in power:

Security Council Secretary Aleksandr Lebed, who strongly advocated Igor Rodionov's appointment as defense minister, could gain almost "limitless authority" over the power structures under a draft law on a proposed new "Military Council," *Kommersant-Daily* reported on 18 July. The article, which was published before Yeltsin announced the creation of a Defense Council, reported that Duma Defense Committee Chairman Lev Rokhlin, who also backed Rodionov, has already prepared a draft law under which the president would chair the Military Council. Decisions of the council would be "binding on all ministries and agencies under whose jurisdiction there may be armed forces, other military units, and military agencies." In the president's absence, the Security Council secretary would chair the Military Council.

*Kommersant-Daily* speculated that given the president's "actual capacity to act" and overcrowded work schedule, the power structures and armed forces would consequently fall under Lebed's authority.<sup>18</sup>

Quite obviously, then, some of Rodionov's ideas are already being put into action.

Finally, as part of his military reform plan, Rodionov advocated reforming activities associated with the development of the information-ideological and moral-psychological areas of military activity. This also should come as no surprise, since the moral-psychological factor is a Russian principle of war. In the absence of any ideology, this factor has undergone a beating in the past five years, resulting in many young people refusing to serve.

These four points, taken from the 22 April article, were reiterated at greater length in Rodionov's 18 November article. Some important additions, however, were also made, such as:

- noting that dividing the functions of the Defense Ministry and General Staff would be a mistake.
- calling for the enhancement of cooperation among all troops, that is the army, navy, border forces, internal forces, and other security forces.
- stating that for all practical purposes Russia does not have a full-fledged supreme commander in chief, a unified system of military command and control, or state leaders who really understand the state of affairs in the field of military development.
- calling for an increase in the number of fully manned, combat-ready large units and other units by sharply reducing the number of military formation of reduced strength, to form the backbone of mobile, professionally trained Russian Armed Forces.
- calling for drafting and adopting a new package of military laws, and clarifying previously adopted legislative acts and a number of important provisions of the state's military doctrine.
- recommending that the staffs of the president, the prime minister, and the Security Council, as well as ministries and departments, have military specialists, and that the General Staff Academy would accommodate this process by organizing training.<sup>19</sup>

## **On the Relation of the Military to Politics**

Writing along with former Soviet Marshall and Minister of Defense Dmitri Yazov, Rodionov penned an article entitled "The Army--At the Zenith of Politics." His willingness to ally himself in writing with an opponent of former General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and Yeltsin (Yazov

was Minister of Defense in 1991 when Yeltsin helped thwart an attempted coup attempt against Gorbachev) indicates where his loyalties may lie among military professionals. The article tried to lay to rest the thoughts of Defense Minister Grachev and his cohorts that the army was outside politics. Rather, much as his program on military reform later revealed, Rodionov wrote that the two are closely intertwined. Rodionov indicated, however, that there were problems even under communism that the political and military authorities shared, problems he will undoubtedly bring to Lebed's attention:

Analyzing our history I generally conclude that the relationship of the top political leadership to the army has always been distinguished in two ways: on the one hand, the political leadership understood that the state needs an army given such a powerful confrontation with an opposing system and given such an uncompromising ideological struggle [a likely reference to the former political and military systems of NATO and the Warsaw Pact]. On the other hand, in my opinion, our political leadership always was somewhat afraid of the army. They were especially afraid of our great army leaders such as Zhukov, and they used any opportunity to demean the army and undermine its authority. This was the policy of Khrushchev and Brezhnev as well. For example, the appointment of Ustinov as Minister of Defense inflicted colossal harm on the army and state.<sup>[20](#)</sup>

Rodionov thus seeks an active role for the military within the political process and sees the need to codify the armed forces as a political institution of the Russian state, attempting to create a unified military-political leadership as part of military reform. He noted that "the army cannot remain aloof from participation in the country's political life. But this must be codified legislatively, so as not to put military personnel in an awkward situation."<sup>[21](#)</sup>

During the Russian presidential elections, Rodionov was not identified with the top generals who unequivocally backed Yeltsin. Rather, he was identified with the top generals who unequivocally opposed Yeltsin's old Minister of Defense, General Grachev. They reportedly included Deputy Defense Ministers Generals B. Gromov, V. Mironov, G. Kondratyev, E. Vorobyev, A. Lebed, and active-duty Generals V. Semenov (commander in chief of the Ground Forces); V. Prudnikov (commander in chief of the Air Defense Forces); and I. Kasatonov (first deputy commander in chief of the Navy). These generals disagreed with the methods and process of military reform, military integration with CIS countries, and military personnel policy. They were very outspoken in their criticism of the way that the Chechen conflict was conducted. Among the reported military district and fleet commanders who represented more of a "quiet" opposition to Grachev were Generals A. Sergeyev (Volga Military District); V. Kopylov (Siberian Military District); Admiral V. Yegorov (Baltic Sea Fleet); and General V. Samsonov, chief of the Main Staff for the Coordination of Military-Technical Cooperation between CIS countries. Lieutenant General L. Ivashov, secretary of the CIS main staff, also reportedly belongs to this group.<sup>[22](#)</sup>

In addition, Rodionov will change the selection process for higher military schools to select the best qualified candidates by performance and not patronage.

## **Likely Emphasis on Information and Future War**

Rodionov will offer for the Security Council's consideration some of the latest and most innovative thinking from the bowels of the General Staff Academy. He will give priority to the development of aerospace weapons, precision guided munitions and advanced C4I--vital components of the Russian view of information and future warfare. He has noted that

The military-technical policy must make the most effective use of achievements in the area of computer science in order to eliminate the imbalance between individual components within the weapon system itself. ...we often lag behind in means of their [weapons] information support, which leads to an increase in ammunition expenditure and puts an excessive load on the support system.<sup>23</sup>

At the General Staff Academy, Rodionov oversaw a cadre that included several information warfare specialists. These included Colonel Aleksandr Pozdnyakov, a deputy department head, who has written on information security and computer viruses, among other subjects; retired Admiral Vladimir Pirumov, now the scientific advisor to the Security Council, who once taught in the academy's electronic warfare department and now is a recognized information warfare specialist; and General Lieutenant Aleksandr Skvortsov and General Major Nikolay Turko, who have written on the impact of information operations on strategic stability on the military. Rodionov should be expected to draw on such experts for advice in the implementation of structural and military-technical military reform.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, General Rodionov is an excellent choice for Defense Minister who should bring true reform to the Russian Armed Forces. However, he may run into trouble with Yeltsin due to his close alliance with Lebed. The latter has already indicated his political aspirations in the year 2000 "or perhaps sooner." Rodionov will serve as Lebed's tutor and advisor, and help construct a more consistent Russian security policy. Top generals from the anti-Grachev group will probably rise under his command. Rodionov also sees an expanded role for the military as a political actor in policy formulation and creation.

He left the readers of his 18 November article on military reform with the following thought:

The world exists and is developing today not in accordance with the "new political thinking" or the "priority of universal human values," but amid global rivalry and a struggle for strategic survival in the 21st century.<sup>24</sup>

In tandem with Alexander Lebed, he will do his best to make the Russian armed forces competitive among those involved in the global rivalry. The Russian armed forces should stand strongly behind Rodionov's attempts to handle hot spots, end corruption in the military, and reform the entire realm of Russia's national defense structure. The only question is whether the government will offer him the funding to do so.

## ***Endnotes***

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